Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

by kerravon

Summary

For an Avengerkink prompt (see notes at end of fic)

Tony Stark was always small, but this was ridiculous! When Tony is hit by a spell that shrinks him to six inches tall, he trusts that his team will take care of him, only to discover that his trust might be misplaced...

Of course, maybe they didn't feel as obligated to watch out for him since he wasn't really an Avenger.

Notes

Now with art by LePeru! Rescue

See the end of the work for more notes.
"Are you kidding me?" demanded the furious genius. "I have to be like this for a week?" He folded his arms across his chest and glowered. Unfortunately, the gesture was far from threatening given his current six-inch height.

"I am afraid so, my friend." Thor lowered his normally-booming tones to almost 'indoor voice' levels. "Possibly slightly longer. It is an inexact enchantment, but alas, there are no counter spells. My brother apparently felt that you needed to be 'cut down to size'." He grimaced at the pun. "My apologies."

Stark's eyes narrowed threateningly at Barton as the other man suppressed a snigger. "Something funny?" he snarled, ignoring the fact that it came out more of a squeak than a threat.

Clint assumed his best poker face and replied, "Not at all. Why do you ask?"

Natasha raised an eyebrow in warning, and the archer rolled his eyes. Apparently billionaire-baiting was off the table of approved activities for the time being.

"Honestly, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with you," interrupted the SHIELD physician. At the outraged glare that got him, he quickly amended, "Medically speaking, that is. There's no reason you can't go home for this to wear off, as long as proper…precautions are taken."

"No problem, doctor," assured Captain Rogers, allowing the other man to nod and make a hurried exit. Turning to Iron Man, he smiled wryly and shook his head. "Just can't stop annoying villains, can you? It'll be the death of you some day."

"I'll take my chances. Can we go home now?" the genius snapped. He was annoyed at how exposed he felt and would be a lot happier back in his own Tower under JARVIS' watchful eye.

Tony Stark reflected bitterly that he hated being Lilliputian even worse than he hated that magic was responsible. As a child he'd always been undersized, and it hadn't helped when he'd skipped several grades and entered MIT at 15. Even now, as an adult, he was shorter than most of his colleagues, and surreptitiously wore lifts in his shoes to give himself a subtle increase in height. It was one of several reasons that he needed to be the biggest personality in any room.
Cap's voice brought him back to the here and now. "Sure, but there need to be a few rules. I promised Miss Potts that we would keep you safe until she got back in two weeks from her business trip to Japan."

Stark rolled his eyes, crossing his arms in annoyance. "What rules?"

"First, someone needs to stay with you at all times. At your height, a fall from the kitchen counter could kill you. We'll all take turns." Barton groaned, only to quiet as both Steve and Natasha shot him a glare.

"I'm not a...a puppy!" Tony spluttered.

Steve plowed forward as if he hadn't heard. "Second, if you need anything, tell someone. Don't try to get it yourself. That's why someone needs to be with you at all times."

Both Barton and Stark opened their mouths to object, only to close them once more at a sharp glance from Cap.

"Finally, no workshop. The kitchen alone has hundreds of ways to kill someone your size; I shudder to think of what could happen to you down in that destruction zone you call a lab."

"I object! I'll be perfectly safe..."

"DUM-E is in the workshop, Tony," interrupted Bruce quietly. "You really want to be down there at this size with him rolling around? You could drown in a Smoothie."

The inventor quirked up a corner of his mouth wryly and held up a finger. "Point," he stated, gesturing at the physicist, then heaved a put-upon sigh. "Fine, no workshop."

"How much work do you really think you could do right now anyway?" asked Steve, sounding genuinely curious.

"That's not the point," grimaced Stark. His lab had always been his ultimate comfort zone, the place to which he retreated when everything just became too overwhelming. It wasn't always about the
work, but the place itself. As ridiculous as it sounded, it was the one spot where he felt safe, and tolerating being six inches tall was going to be infinitely harder without it.

He acceded with poor grace. "Fine, whatever," he growled. "Can we just go now?"


"No, you need to go through that gate!," squeaked Tony from the couch as Steve, Thor, Natasha and Clint raced their virtual cars. Clint had always loved Mario Kart, but Stark's 60" flat-screen took 'friendly competition' to a whole new level. And playing videogames with a demi-god, a super soldier, and his favorite Soviet assassin? Well, that never got old.

However, Barton reflected, Tony's high-pitched bleating had gotten old fast. If anything, the man complained now more than ever.

"Would you can it, Stark? Some of us are trying to concentrate!" He wrenched his controller to the side, narrowly avoiding a collision with Thor.

"Just because I'm little, bird-brain, doesn't give you the right to ignore me! It's not easy being this small…"

That one again?" Clint rolled his eyes and huffed, then cupped a hand around his ear dramatically. "Say, did anyone hear that? I think there's a mouse in here!"

Natasha, clearly just as tired of Tony's constant complaints after a week as Clint, jumped up in mock horror, dropping her controller as she melodramatically feigned fright. "A mouse? Eeek!" She gave the fakest little-girl shriek she could manage, then leapt onto the seat of a nearby armchair. "Where? Where?" Her fingers fluttered ineffectually in the air as if she were on a daytime Soap.

Tony crossed his tiny arms across his chest and glowered at them both while Barton practically rolled with laughter at his partner's antics. Steve just shook his head in resignation as he took the racing lead, while Thor didn't notice the byplay at all. Bruce had long since retreated to his lab to get some work done. He never played videogames; he might get too involved and lose control. Clint could commiserate; there were times when his own inner-Hulk wanted to smash things.

"Come on, Stark, it was funny!" Barton groused as he resumed the game, then groaned. He was so
far behind he would probably never catch up. Still, it had been worth it to see the Black Widow play 'fake helpless female'. "Besides," he reasoned, "You'll be back to your regular-sized self any day now, right Thor?"

"Verily!" agreed the blonde in distraction, maneuvering his vehicle past Cap's once more.

"I don't care. This sucks." The billionaire glared petulantly. "I can't play, you won't listen to me, and I'm hungry."

"I could get you some cheese, little mouse," volunteered Natasha, stretching luxuriously. "I'm done here, anyway."

"Har-de-har-har," grumbled Tony.

Clint sighed in frustration and gave up, standing with a huff of annoyance. "Nah. My turn to cook dinner. Come on." He held a palm out at the level of the couch cushion for the mini-Avenger to climb onto.

Stark narrowed his eyes unhappily; he had already made his displeasure at this form of transport abundantly clear, but, after a week, it was obvious that no one cared. To add insult to injury, try as he might, he couldn't get JARVIS to recognize his new, high-pitched voice, so he was completely dependent upon his house guests for his needs.

At first they had been quite considerate, practically waiting on him hand and foot. But as time wore on and they got used to his new… situation, the group became more blasé about his size and its associated risks. Steve chuckled as he set him on a high shelf where "he couldn't get hurt" when he cooked breakfast and disregarded the outraged ranting that followed. Thor carried him around like a puppy, all but patting him on the head and ignoring him when he insisted on being set down. Both Natasha and Clint acted as if he were a particularly troublesome two-year-old, making him climb on their hands or shoulders when they went from room to room. Bruce was the only person who still listened and helped him without grousing or fanfare. But Bruce was in his lab, and Tony really was hungry.

Barton had long ago given up trying to please the industrialist and jiggled his hand expectantly. "Take it or leave it, Stark, but I'm heading to the kitchen."

The billionaire considered just staying where he was, but his stomach took that moment to make its
presence known, loudly. His shoulders sagged in defeat as he climbed onto the archer’s hand. Clint felt a brief twinge of remorse at the sight, which was quickly smothered by renewed irritation as Stark settled ostentatiously in the center of his palm with an imperious, ”Forward, Jeeves!”

"Your wish is my command," he gritted as he carried Tony from the room.

Despite his show of bravado, the engineer felt his heart thudding against the arc reactor. He carefully closed his eyes and wished fervently for his workshop. Being deprived of his sanctuary had ratcheted his anxiety level even higher, causing his heart to pound at the slightest provocation. A dropped book, a slammed door, a muttered curse, a misstep on the part of the person carrying him—all these sent his pulse racing, the blood whistling in his ears, and he would breathe too hard, too fast, until he almost passed out from hyperventilation.

One advantage to his current size? No one really noticed when he was having a panic attack.

So, to distract both himself and his teammates, he complained, loud and long. The more uncomfortable the situation, the more colorful his associated cursing became, until one day Natasha had simply dropped him into a shoebox and closed the lid to muffle the sound. In the dark, alone, with only the distorted voices of the team for company, he couldn't help but think of caves, and darkness, and shrapnel in his heart, and he became speechless as he gasped for breath.

Unfortunately the team interpreted this silence as a success, and began to repeat the 'experiment' whenever he became too obnoxious. Several of the group smiled and referred to his being in the shoebox as a "time out" like he was an errant toddler. Not that he'd been behaving much better than your average two-year-old, but being this small was legitimately terrifying! Tony Stark coped with fear by becoming louder and more annoying. Deal with it.

He couldn't wait to return to his normal size.

Once Barton set him on the counter and got him a small portion of donut to nibble on, he wandered towards the stove where the archer was working and tried to help. There was not much he could contribute at his size beyond constructive criticism, however.

"You should add a little more salt…” critiqued the industrialist. He slid a hand along the edge of the
mixing bowl and tasted it, eyes closed in concentration. Clint shut his own eyes in irritation; the pint-sized inventor had done nothing but disparage Clint's cooking for the last forty-five minutes. It would be one thing if it were Steve; Cap was a damn fine chef, even if he had a tendency towards (shudder) wholesome, well-balanced meals. But Tony? Tony could burn water! The archer meant that literally; he'd actually seen it happen once. And for him to stand in judgment of Clint's culinary skills was infuriating!


Taking a few deep breaths, he slowly opened his eyes and glanced at the miniature genius, who was smirking up at him. Tiny Tony rocked back and forth on his heels, apparently delighted at his response. "Just because you can't take a little constructive criticism, Barton..." he began, only to cut off with a squawk as Clint seized him around his waist like King Kong and Fay Wray.

What the hell? "Hey! Let me go!" the inventor shouted. He hadn't even done anything this time! He was just helping with dinner; he hadn't even been cursing! His tiny fists pounded ineffectually on the outside of the marksman's hand as they headed for the cupboard.

His breath caught in his throat as he saw Clint yank out a large, opaque, plastic container and pry off the lid one handed. No! Surely he wouldn't.... Before he could finish the thought, Tony was unceremoniously dumped in on his backside and, to his horror, the lid snapped completely shut.

"I warned you," Barton's statement was barely discernable through the thick plastic. "Time out."

"Barton, no! Don't you dare!," he screamed, real panic slamming into his chest. He felt the container being lifted and placed on a hard surface, then the small amount of light that filtered through the blue plastic disappeared as well, leaving him in complete darkness. "No!!!" he shrieked as the Chitauri wormhole played at the edge of his vision. "Clint, this thing is airtight! I'll suffocate!"

The marksman ignored the muffled, indistinct shouting as he shoved the container back in the cabinet and closed the door, cheerfully anticipating the prospect of preparing the rest of dinner in silence.

Getting no response to his screams, the engineer forcibly shoved the panic away by concentrating on his anger instead. Anger might help him figure a way out of this; fear would just kill him faster.
"He'd never treat Romanov this way," he muttered as he stubbornly attempted to push the lid up enough to let in some air. "Or any of the other Avengers, for that matter," he groused. He looked around but there was nothing else in the container to use as a tool or lever, so he was stuck with his own limited strength. After a few minutes of struggle he was sweating from exertion but the top remained tightly sealed. As he rested his hands on his knees and panted for breath, his brain replayed his last statement and his eyes went wide.

"Oh my God. Maybe...I'm not an Avenger?" Despite the impression given by Coulson at the time of the Chitauri invasion, no one had actually said he was a full member of the team. If he were still just a Consultant... No wonder everyone treated him differently! That would certainly explain why he had been stuck in an airtight box in a cabinet without a second thought. He was a 'consultant'. He was expendable.

Finally acknowledging that he was unable to budge the lid, the billionaire went back to yelling for help. Maybe someone else would wander into the kitchen and hear him? Even if he weren't an Avenger, they wouldn't just let him die, would they?

At the noise, Barton rolled his eyes. The renewed muffled shouting and banging coming from the cupboard was even more distracting after the brief respite. Clint still couldn't understand the words but he was sure it was more whining, so he reached towards a nearby radio to drown out the sound. Quickly scanning the channels, he finally settled on a country music station that was particularly twangy and cranked the volume. That'd show Mr. Rock-and-Roll a thing or two.

Tony heard the radio volume increase, drowning out any noise he might make. Now, even if Rogers came into the room, there was little chance of rescue. In frustration he pounded futilely on the hard container wall, words and threats gradually giving way to heaving sobs as he slid down the side of the Tupperware.

There would be no answer to his desperate pleas. No one was listening. No one was coming for him. He choked out a strangled laugh at the irony. He was going to die at six inches tall, asphyxiated by modern food preservation.

His last coherent thought before the panic attack overwhelmed him was that not only was he going to suffocate alone, in the dark, but he was going to do it to the strains of Hank Williams.

He curled into a miserable, hyperventilating ball and sank beneath a sea of alien stars.

Clint had just finished setting the food on the table when Steve and Thor wandered in. Steve's eyes lit with pleasure as he flicked off the radio and inhaled deeply. "What's for dinner tonight? It smells amazing!"

"Goulash. Would you mind calling the others?"

"Already did; they're on their way." Steve grabbed a pitcher of apple juice to set on the table as Thor took a seat. Grabbing a chair himself, Cap's brows creased and he looked around, frowning. "Wait a second. I thought Tony was with you?"

Clint grimaced. "He was driving me crazy so I stuck him in the cabinet. I'll let him out once everyone is ready to eat."

Steve was frowning. While he could commiserate, he still had a sense of vague unease. "What if he climbs up on something while trying to get out and falls?"

"Nah," the archer replied as he set out the plates. "I put him in an empty Tupperware so he couldn't hurt himself."

"Oh. I guess that's OK. They're awfully smooth." Steve had loved the containers the first time he'd ever seen them. They made food much easier to sort and keep organized.

"A 'time out'? Is that why we can't hear him?" asked Thor. He didn't know much about the reusable storage bins other than they were very hard to accidentally destroy.

Clint snorted. "That was the idea. I had to turn up the radio to completely drown out the shouting, though." He tilted his head, listening intently. "Guess he finally gave up. He's probably sulking." The archer chuckled. "He hates being in time out."

Steve winced. Tony was really not going to be amused when he regained his normal stature. "Well, I'd better get him. Where is he exactly?"

"I sealed him in the big, blue Tupperware, third from the left." Clint pointed towards the appropriate cabinet.
“What?!?” Bruce entered the kitchen just in time to catch Clint's last statement and his eyes widened in horror. "You SEALED Tony in a TUPPERWARE?"

"It has certainly quieted the Man of Iron!” Thor chuckled.

Bruce whirled on him, eyes green and glowing, fists clenched at his sides. "Of course it has! THEY'RE AIRTIGHT!!!!"

Barton's stomach dropped as the realization suddenly hit. "Oh my God…" he whispered, stunned. He hadn't thought of that. He'd just considered its ability to drown out Tony's voice.

Banner was panting, desperately struggling to maintain control. "Where????" he growled subvocally, unable to manage more than the single word.

Clint's appalled eyes flew to the cabinet just as Nat entered the room. The physicist said nothing as he unceremoniously shoved past her and strode to the indicated cupboard, flinging it open. As the rest of the Avengers surged forward, meal forgotten, Bruce seized the opaque, plastic box from the shelf and tore off the lid.

A tiny, frail, Tony Stark lay crumpled in the corner of the container, deathly still. Bruce took a deep breath, then stretched out a hand and gently scooped up the limp form, cradling him against the warmth of his own chest as he tried to examine him.

Barton hesitantly extended a hand towards the tiny figure. "Is he…?" he began.

"Back off!” snarled the scientist, eyes flaring green and furious as they snapped to Clint's face. The archer gulped audibly and raised his hands in a placating gesture, palms forward, easing backwards a step or two. As Bruce returned to examining his unconscious friend, the rest of the Avengers shifted uncomfortably but remained silent.

Finally, Steve couldn't stand it any longer. "Bruce?" he asked with trepidation.

The eyes, while still angry, were at least brown. That was a good sign, wasn't it?
"He’s breathing," came the succinct reply. The rest of the group began to relax, only to be jolted by the comment that followed. "It's too soon to tell how much anoxic brain damage he suffered."

"Brain damage?" Steve was aghast.

"Why do you think he was unconscious, Captain? The brain needs oxygen to survive; that container was airtight." He turned and snarled at Clint. "Congratulations, agent. You may never have to listen to his wise-ass commentary again." He whirled and strode from the room, his tiny friend still clutched oh-so-carefully to his chest. "We'll be in my lab. I'll let you know if he wakes up."

"If?" Thor questioned unhappily. "Should we not alert the medical personnel of SHIELD?"

"If I understand the situation, there's not much they could do, and a regular physician wouldn't be equipped to deal with Stark's current stature. Bruce will call if he needs help; he won't endanger Stark unnecessarily." Natasha raised an eyebrow at the archer. "You put him in a sealed plastic box in a dark cupboard?"  At Barton's shamed nod, her mouth thinned grimly and she suppressed a shudder. It must have felt like being buried alive - dark, no air, no one answering his increasingly frantic supplications…

Barton hunched miserably into himself and refused to meet her eyes. If only he'd taken half a moment to think! He'd just been so angry; no one thought twice anymore about putting Tony in a 'time out' box whenever he became too annoying, since it always seemed to shut the man up. But the boxes had always been cardboard, not plastic!

Still, Clint never meant to hurt him. He just wanted him quiet while dinner cooked. Well, he got his wish, didn't he?

The group stared at each other in horror for a moment before Steve straightened and started towards the door. Natasha grasped his upper arm gently but firmly, holding the super soldier in place.

"I wouldn't if I were you. It won't help Stark if Banner loses it before he can hook him up to oxygen." Natasha murmured reasonably.

Steve looked as anguished as Clint felt. "I didn't know they were airtight," he groaned. "I thought Tupperware were just plastic boxes made for storing food in the icebox."
"As did I," added Thor. "Nigh-indestructible as well."

Barton's legs suddenly began to shake as their strength fled and he plopped gracelessly into the nearest chair. "I did know. I just didn't think about it." He dropped his face into his hands and leaned his elbows on his knees. "God, I may have caused brain damage. Hell, I almost killed the man!" He sat up and stared at the ceiling. "All because I was a little annoyed." The archer clasped his hands together in front of himself as the rest of the team took seats as well.

"I'd give my left eye to hear him snarking at me right now," he whispered, staring at his hands.

No one else said a word. Despite the goulash that was gradually growing cold, no one was very hungry, either.


Tony's eyes blinked open to a very bright light, and he frowned. There was something wrong with the brightness… wasn't it supposed to be dark for some reason? He squinted in concentration as he tried to remember, and a cool breeze ruffled his hair.

"Hey there. How are you feeling?" Tony was startled by Bruce's giant face suddenly looming over him, and the memories hit him like a diesel truck. The miniature genius' eyes widened in fear as he began sucking in deep, panicked breaths. Glancing anxiously around the room, he realized that he was lying on the pillow of the gurney Bruce used as a makeshift infirmary bed. The 'breeze' was actually air blowing from an oxygen cannula, and the light was an overhead exam light, which explained the brightness. He was in the medical bay at Avengers Tower, the one used for minor problems and stubborn patients.

Huh. It looked like he hadn't suffocated after all.

That didn't keep him from reflexively gulping in deep breaths as fast as he could, the memory of his plastic would-be-tomb fresh in his mind.

"Shhh, shhh. It's all right, Tony. Calm down." Banner spoke in low, soothing tones to his tiny hyperventilating friend. "You're safe. I got you out in time." Bruce had asked JARVIS to scan the engineer the moment they entered the lab. To the physicist's relief, it turned out that Tony had actually lost consciousness due to hyperventilation rather than oxygen deprivation. There had been
"If you keep that up you'll pass out again. Come on, breathe with me." Bruce inhaled slowly but deeply through his nose, held it a beat, then exhaled just as slowly through his mouth. "Come on. You can do it. In…and out. In…and out."

Tony's wide, frightened eyes caught Bruce's and finally stopped, staring as if trying to understand the meaning of his words. Gradually, gaze still fixed on Banner, he forced his breathing to slow, matching the other man breath for breath.

"That's it. You got it. Feeling better?"

After a few moments more of controlled breathing, Tony nodded jerkily and rasped, "Yeah, that…that helped, thanks." He struggled to sit up, breath catching once more as Bruce eased two fingers behind his back to assist.

"I can't believe Clint did that," Bruce glowered, voice raspy and eyes just the slightest bit green. "He could have killed you just because he was annoyed!"

Tony snorted and lightly responded, "Yeah, well, so could most of the people living in this Tower, and that's when I'm normal sized." He laughed slightly, but it rang hollow.

"It's not funny." Banner stood and began to pace agitatedly. "There's so much that can happen when you're half-a-foot tall; you don't need super powered teammates taking those risks for granted."

The genius dropped all pretense of humor and rubbed a hand tiredly through his sweat-soaked hair. "Yeah, well, I bring it on myself. I've always been smaller than average - I get it from my Mom - so I make up for it with personality." He grimaced self-deprecatingly. "Being an asshole has gotten me into trouble before. You can't really blame Barton for reacting to that."

"Oh, yes I can," snapped the other scientist. "Just because putting you in a box gets you quiet doesn't excuse…" He stopped his angry pacing as he trailed off, gazing unseeingly at the far wall. "Why is that, anyway?"

Tony stared at his lap and heaved a sigh, not pretending to misunderstand. For saving his life, Bruce deserved an honest answer. He steeled his resolve and mumbled, "When I'm suddenly unexpectedly
stuck in a dark, enclosed space, I… sometimes I… " He gulped nervously, but didn't raise his eyes even though he could feel the other scientist watching him. "Sometimes… I'm back in that Afghani cave… or on the other side of the wormhole with a nuke on my back."

Bruce was silent for a moment, then sat heavily on the chair next to the industrialist's bed. "God, Tony. You go quiet because you're having a flashback?!?" He dragged a palm down his face, then muttered to himself, "Of course you do." He tilted his head sideways, brows drawing down. "Why didn't you say something? The members of this team may sometimes be stupid, but they're not knowingly cruel."

"Come on, Bruce! Under normal circumstances I'm the weakest link on this team; right now I'm actually a liability. If Fury knew I had… episodes, he'd kick me off all together."

Banner huffed a laugh. "Come on, Tony. Fury wouldn't..."

"Bruce. I didn't make the initial cut. The official report said...," he sighed bitterly, "Iron Man, yes. Tony Stark, not recommended."

"Seriously?" The scientist sported an incredulous expression then huffed in wry amusement. "They actively recruit the Other Guy, but don't want a billionaire genius? That's some messed up priorities."

The inventor gave a self-conscious shrug and continued. "Yeah, well, next thing I knew Coulson was hacking his way past JARVIS with that Tesseract stuff and claims that 'this wasn't about personality profiles anymore', so I assumed I was on the team." He grimaced. "At least, that's what I believed before all this happened." He gestured at himself, indicating his current small stature. "Now I realize that I'm just a convenience rather than a full-fledged team member."

"Tony, no. Where did that idea even come from?" Bruce objected reasonably. "You're as much an Avenger as anyone else."

"Yeah, right." The engineer snorted in disbelief. "I've contracted with the military for enough years to know how they think. The easiest way for them to get what they want is to lie by omission, because it's not really lying, is it? If you imply that something is true, but don't actually say it, you can't be held responsible for mistaken assumptions." He shook his head in self-disgust. "Fury played me, and I believed it because I wanted it to be true. No one ever said, verbally or in writing, that I was on the team. Sure, it was implied… so now SHIELD has a shiny new home for its
superheroes, free tech support, and a billionaire weapons manufacturer at their beck and call. And if the shit hits the fan, or I get taken out by the villain-of-the-week… or accidentally asphyxiated by food storage? Hey, no harm, no foul; he wasn't an Avenger anyway!"

Bruce shook his head more emphatically. "Come on, Tony, you don't really…"

The engineer cut him off angrily. "Come on, even the Wonder Twins realized it! Hell, Natasha wrote my initial assessment! Do you really think Barton would drop an actual Avenger into an airtight container and then close them up in a dark…” His voice cracked and he cut off his sentence abruptly. His Adam's apple bobbed as he convulsively swallowed and turned his head, closing his eyes. After a moment he whispered "If you don't mind, I'm really tired."

Bruce knew that the diminutive genius was trying not to break down in front of a witness and so let it go.

"Sure, Tony. You rest. I'll be around if you need me," He moved away loudly enough that the engineer could hear him go, then sighed internally as he watched his friend visibly relax. Clearly right now the billionaire didn't trust anybody, and Bruce found that he really couldn't blame him.

TBC.....
Banner entered the kitchen three days later to find Natasha seated alone at the center island, sipping tea. "Morning," he said politely as he passed her on the way to the coffee maker.

"Good morning," she replied serenely, keeping her eyes on her magazine. "How is Stark today?"

"Decaffeinated," Bruce chuckled, holding up a huge, empty mug. "He’s run out in his lab, so sent me up here to retrieve more." Tony had returned to normal size the day after he almost asphyxiated and made a beeline for his workshop as fast as he could pull on a pair of jeans and t-shirt. Once back in his comfort zone he shut down all communication except for Bruce and JARVIS. Pepper was still away on business, so she would hopefully be allowed to interact with him on her return, but at present the genius was even refusing to talk to Steve, and that was frankly disturbing on a number of levels.

"I left him a message. He missed our regular sparring session." Natasha commented demurely. "I had to do yoga instead."

Bruce winced, but held his ground. "He's not really feeling up to his regular..." a pause as he chose his words carefully, "activities". It was a good bet that Tony had become entrenched in the idea that he was only a SHIELD 'consultant' and as such wasn't supposed to train with the team. Bruce refrained from heaving a sigh.

The Russian's eyebrow lifted in surprise, but she obviously bit back her initial response. Instead she nodded and resumed reading. "Tell him I expect him to be there next week."

Bruce took the now-filled cup and moved deliberately to the exit. "I'll be sure to pass that along," he murmured noncommittally. He wasn't sure how to convince the insecure billionaire that the team actually cared for him and considered him one of their own, and weren't just interested in what they could wheedle out of him. It was hard to reconcile with their dismissive treatment when he had been involuntarily made small and useless. It was even harder when Bruce wasn't sure he believed it himself.


Tony hummed along contentedly to "Highway to Hell" as he carefully soldered the delicate wiring of his right hand repulsor. God, it was good to be back in his workshop! He'd missed his bots, his
interfaces, and the productive feeling of having three major projects under development simultaneously. Also, even if he was only a consultant to the team, it was still important to keep the armor in top shape. After all, he was always summoned whenever the team was activated and didn’t want to jeopardize that

His armor had been extensively damaged in the fight with Loki but he hadn’t been allowed to work on it while miniaturized. Of course, he hadn’t been able to do much of anything at that height, so he’d caught up on sleep and paperwork. Now back to full size, such as it was, he could devote most of his energy to his armor.

"Sir, Captain Rogers is once again requesting entry," JARVIS interrupted politely.

Tony scowled, refusing to look up. "Tell him I’m busy!" he snapped in irritation. Squinting his left eye, he focused his attention on the tiny joint he was creating.

"He asked me to inform you that you said the same thing twelve hours ago."

"And it's still true…!" he sing-songed blithely, diving under the workbench to retrieve a wiring spool that had rolled away earlier, ignoring the unhappy shadow lurking outside the workroom door.

"Sir, Captain Rogers wanted to make you aware that breakfast was currently available in the common kitchen, should you be interested in joining the rest of the group."

Tony stilled for a moment, squelching a flare of panic. No, he was not doing that. He could barely stand to think about the kitchen; he was pretty sure he’d vomit if he actually entered that room right now. He squeezed his eyes shut, took in a deep, shuddering breath, then opened them and returned to work, hands flying over the wiring he was repairing. "Not hungry," he muttered. "Tell him I’m fine. I can order take-out when I need it."

It was true, he thought. Hell, he could have a five course meal physically delivered to his workshop if he wanted. He never had to go into that kitchen again.

Running the preliminary firing sequence on the glove repulsor, he frowned. "Hmmm. Still glitching. I need to check the relays back of this…" Within a few moments he was lost in the puzzle, not surfacing for air for over an hour. When he did, he noted that Rogers was gone, but a post-it note was stuck to the outer workshop window. Curious, he cautiously wandered over.
"Breakfast," was the only word on the paper, followed by a downward-pointing arrow. Looking in that direction, he caught sight of the corner of a tray. He glanced up and down the corridor, then cracked open the door when he was certain no one was lurking outside. There was indeed a tray, filled with bacon, eggs, toast, and juice. He had to smile at the two packages of Pop Tarts set on the side. Clearly Thor felt the meal was lacking a major food group.

Well, he supposed he could eat.

Picking up the tray, he quickly retreated back into the workshop, locking the door firmly behind himself again.


Clint pushed the food around on his plate dejectedly; he didn't really feel like eating. Since the night he had almost inadvertently killed Tony, the engineer had not participated in any of the team activities that he always used to enjoy, blaming his absence on having to 'catch up' in his workshop. They'd called down on numerous occasions, 'forgetting' that it wasn't his turn to chose on movie night, challenging him to his favorite video games, volunteering to cook his favorite foods. Nothing budged him from his garage except Pepper, and then only for meetings that he couldn't postpone. Fortunately there hadn't been any calls to Assemble in the two weeks since the accident; the team wasn't sure that Iron Man would actually respond.

"Go on, it's good." Bruce smiled gently at Clint over the rim of his glasses. "A recipe I picked up in India."

Steve huffed. "Not too spicy?" he asked. The super soldier's taste ran to meat and potatoes, the blander the better.

"No," replied Bruce with a chuckle. He gathered up a plate and set it on a tray, adding a glass of juice beside it.

Natasha arched an eyebrow. "For Stark? Why can't he come get it himself? Better yet, why can't he come up for a meal occasionally? Is he too good for us?" She was obviously trying to rile Bruce into revealing information, her lack of subtlety almost certainly deliberate.

The scientist just shook his head as he picked up the tray and headed for the stairs to the workshop. Fine. He'd throw her a bone. "Just the opposite," he snorted as he left the room.
Nat's fake-affronted expression narrowed in contemplation at Bruce's retreating back, recognizing the intentional clue.

Clint straightened at that look. "What? What did you just figure out?"

Steve and Thor sat very still, watching intently.

"Stark isn't eating with us because we're too good for him…" she murmured.

"What? That doesn't make any sense, Nat."

She tapped her lower lip thoughtfully. "No, but Banner said 'just the opposite', and Stark has always been his own worst critic. I should know; I gathered the intel for his SHIELD profile."

"Bozhe moi…"

"What?" Clint was desperate to make amends for his thoughtlessness, but he couldn't do it if the man never made an appearance. If Natasha had a theory as to why Tony was playing Howard Hughes in the basement, he was all ears.

She looked around the table, assessing, then nodded to herself. "He's decided that he's not part of the team; that he's not good enough to be an Avenger."

"I do not see…" began Thor, just as Steve and Clint voiced their own objections:

"How can almost dying from an accident…"

"Wait; this is my fault, not…"

Natasha held up a hand for silence. "First, I am very good at what I do, and what I do best is understand people in order to extract information from them. A few years ago, when SHIELD was first considering the Avengers Initiative, I was sent undercover to evaluate Tony Stark."

At everyone's slow nod, she continued. "Unfortunately it was when he was being poisoned by the very
device keeping him alive, so he was even more erratic than usual. He was deemed unsuitable for the team based on that evaluation, but was nevertheless hired on by SHIELD as a consultant. He is a genius, after all."

The group exchanged perplexed glances, but when no one interrupted she continued blandly. "When Loki stole the Tesseract, the team was activated. I was called in early as Barton was compromised." Clint appreciated the factual tone and gave her a small grateful nod. "Coulson sent me to recruit Dr. Banner, while he went to retrieve Mr. Stark." A small crease appeared between her brows. "I do not know what was actually discussed, but I assumed that Mr. Stark was made a full member of the Avengers at that time. If he wasn't..." she trailed off. "This could be bad."

Thor and Steve were still obviously confused, but Clint appeared to be catching on. "He's not angry at all," he groaned, dropping his head to the table. As if he didn't have enough guilt! "He really thinks he's not a team member. That's why he's not participating in 'team' activities. If he isn't good enough to be an Avenger, he doesn't have the right to hang out with us either."

Steve looked between the two agents in bewilderment. "I still don't understand. How does accidentally being almost suffocated result in concluding that he isn't an Avenger?"

Thor, of all people, suddenly got it. "Because no one would knowingly treat their Shield brother in such a cavalier fashion, correct? Ergo, he must not be one."

Natasha nodded. "And if Coulson said anything short of 'Congratulations, you're an Avenger' when he went to brief him, I guarantee that's what he believes."

Clint slumped back in his chair. "Great. So, how do we fix it?"

Steve cleared his throat. "Let me get this straight. You're saying that Stark's problem is low self-esteem?" He was openly skeptical. "Insecure is not a word I associate with Tony Stark."

Natasha arched a brow. "I'm not surprised you think that. He's worked all his life to perfect that outer façade."

"Fine! How do we fix it?" Clint threw out his hands in frustration.

"We tell him that he's a valued member if the team. Over. And over. And over." He glanced
around the table. "If we all just keep being supportive and apologetic, sooner or later we'll get through that thick skull of his."

Rogers turned his attention back to his dinner, certain that they had a plan. After exchanging a few doubtful glances, the others did as well.


"Tony, you can't hide down here forever." Bruce said mildly as he sat on a lab stool next to the famished engineer who was rapidly inhaling his dinner. A piece of the Iron Man armor lay forgotten on the workbench, next to new arrows that Tony had been developing for Clint.

"I'm not 'hiding', Bruce," he responded around a mouthful of Masala. "I'm working!" He swept a hand towards his armor upgrades, new scalemail for Rogers, and radiolucent knives for Natasha.

"Come on, Tony. At least come up for a couple of hours. It's team movie night, and you're overdue to pick the film!" Banner was teasing, but insistent.

"That only applies to actual Avengers," the engineer muttered sullenly under his breath.

Bruce cocked an eyebrow as he gently lay a hand on the genius' shoulder. "And you are an Avenger," he insisted.

Tony grimaced, pushing his plate away. He'd suddenly lost his appetite. "You and I both know better," he grunted dejectedly. "I hadn't thought about it until the incident with Barton, but no one at SHIELD actually ever upgraded me from 'consultant' status." He plastered on a fake smile that he usually reserved for the press as he continued, "Hey, it's better this way! I don't have any 'team' obligations, so can devote more of my precious time to running my multibillion dollar corporation."

"Tony…" Bruce began, only to be cut off by the inventor leaping to his feet and clapping his hands together in feigned excitement.

"Nope, none of that. I'm a busy man, Bruce. Busy, busy, busy. Pepper needs the specs on the new Starkphone apps before the Board meeting next week, I have these equipment upgrades to finish, my left hand repulsor output is still 0.3% off maximum, and I have a metric ton of paperwork to finish, so I need to get a move on." He finally paused to catch his breath, then raised his head to meet the
physicist's eyes and finished more sincerely, "Thanks for bringing me dinner, though. I'll eat the rest of it later."

Bruce pursed his lips and sighed, glancing away and nodding, "All right. You're welcome. Don't think this means the discussion is over."

Tony smiled again, and this time it reached his eyes. "Wouldn't dream if it, Big Green."


He finally ran out of coffee in his workshop when Bruce wasn't around, necessitating a personal visit to the communal kitchen to retrieve more. He was running on fumes by this point and needed the caffeine if he wanted to avoid sleep and the accompanying nightmares for a few more hours. Stumbling into the room, he beelined for the coffee maker, pleased to see that there was a fresh, almost-full pot ready and waiting. He grabbed a mug and quickly filled it with the steaming beverage. Not stopping to add cream or sugar, he simply tipped it back and consumed the entire thing in one go. Years of similar behavior miraculously kept his tongue from being burnt. He sighed contentedly then refilled it, taking a long whiff of the familiar aroma now that he was no longer quite so desperate.

"Hey, Tony," an amused voice said behind him, and he jumped, heart hammering, whirling to face one Captain Rogers. The blonde was sitting at the table in sweats, drinking from his own cup and casually reading the morning paper.

Huh. So that was why there was a fresh pot of coffee.

"Captain," he replied formally with a small jerk of his head.

Steve's smile at the reply could have lit up Manhattan, Tony was certain. "Nice to see you out of your cave," the soldier joked.

Now that the caffeine was hitting his system, the engineer realized that this was the first time he'd been in the kitchen since the… incident. He glanced nervously around, but wasn't exactly sure why. "Well, you know…" he trailed off, gesturing vaguely. "Things to do, people to see."

A hesitant expression crossed Roger's face. "You know, I was just getting ready to make breakfast
"No, no." The billionaire shook his head quickly, backing slightly away. "That's OK. I wouldn't want to intrude." He finished off the cup in his hand and turned to get a last refill before retreating to his workshop once more.

"You wouldn't be intruding. You are part of the team, too, Tony." Steve was emphatic, using his 'Captain America' voice.

The mechanic dredged up a wan smile. "Nice of you to say so, but Fury made it pretty clear that my personality profile relegated me to 'consultant' status." He tapped his chin consideringly as he stared towards the ceiling, making a show of remembering. "The exact phrase was, 'Iron Man, yes. Tony Stark, not recommended'." He sipped from his mug as he edged towards the exit. "So, I'll leave the Avengers to their team breakfast, alright?" He darted out the door and was gone before Steve could open his mouth to reply.

Natasha sauntered in just after the inventor made his escape. "That went well," she commented with a raised eyebrow.

Steve grimaced. "Not so much. That's the third time in as many days that I've actually come right out and said that he was an Avenger, but he isn't buying it."

Natasha sat primly at the table with a nod of agreement. "Yes. Even though our behavior triggered his insecurity, Stark is surprisingly reluctant to accept our reassurances to the contrary."

Bruce entered the kitchen and went to the refrigerator. "At this point he's beyond any rational discussion. I think the only person he'll believe is Director Fury himself."

Steve sighed and closed his eyes and rubbed them as if to stave off a headache, even though he didn't get them since the serum. "I'll go see the Director today, then."

"What, Fury?," asked Clint as he joined the group.

Steve nodded. "I'll try to avoid the specifics in the discussion, but we need our old Tony back."
The archer had no answer, just studied the floor as if it contained the secrets of the universe. The room fell silent as Steve headed for the stove to make a meal that no one felt like eating.


"I beg your pardon?" Steve Rogers' head tilted awkwardly as he stared at Nick Fury in total disbelief.

Fury glared at him with one baleful eye as he stood from his chair, paperwork forgotten. "You heard me, Captain. Mr. Stark is actually a SHIELD consultant, nothing more. His personality profile indicates that he is too much a lone wolf to be useful on a team of superheroes."

Steve was grateful that he had listened to his instincts and decided to hold this conversation in person rather than over the phone. He leaned onto the desk with both arms, intentionally invading the Director's space. "Tony Stark is the only reason the death toll from the Chitauri invasion wasn't in the millions, and you have the gall to claim him too self-centered to be an Avenger? He damn near died! On top of that, he provides the team full room and board! Tech support! He responds to every alert, has risked his life again and again, and you honestly stand there and say he's not good enough?" Cap's voice had risen in his anger.

Fury calmly arched an eyebrow. "If you are finished?"

Steve stood ramrod straight and crossed his arms fully over his chest. If there was ever an immovable object, it was the Captain.

Fury sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache looming. This was not going to go well. He opened his eye and glared at Steve in frustration. After a moment he glanced away, sighing, and shuffled some papers randomly on his desk. "Look," he began in a conciliatory tone, "In some back-assed thought process, the WSC blames Stark for the political fallout from the nuke." He held up a hand, palm forward, to halt Cap's automatic objection. "No, it doesn't make sense. The WSC ordered the missile; Stark is the only reason millions didn't die needlessly. Nevertheless, the Council has twisted that around until they claim that his only motivation was to make them look bad. So...they won't approve him being an Avenger." As Cap opened his mouth to object, the Director again held up his hand for silence. "He's lucky to still be a Consultant. There is nothing more I can do; my hands are tied."

He fixed Steve with a very pointed look. "Dismissed." He turned his back and shifted to shuffling through papers on a side table, ignoring the flabbergasted Captain entirely.
After a moment Rogers shut his mouth with a snap, narrowed his eyes and whirled sharply to exit, slamming the door behind him. Fury allowed his hands to still as a small, secretive smile quirked his lips and was gone.


"Are you shitting me?" demanded Barton. "Fury actually said that?"

"Seriously?" joined Bruce, mouth agape. "I know I've said this before, but SHIELD actively recruited the Other Guy. How can they possibly believe that Tony Stark isn't as qualified to be an Avenger as the Hulk?"

The team, sans Tony, had gathered in the communal living room to discuss Steve's meeting with Fury, and had been uniformly shocked to discover that Stark's 'misunderstandings' were actually fact. Steve splayed his hands in dismay. "Fury says that it's the WSC; they think the only reason Iron Man flew the nuke into the wormhole was to make them look bad."

Natasha gave an unladylike snort. "As if. They don't need his help to 'look bad'. They do that quite well on their own."

"Nevertheless, it turns out that Tony was right; he really isn't an Avenger."

"But what..." the question remained unspoken as the call to Assemble blared from their comms.


It was both surprising and yet not when Iron Man responded as quickly and snarkily as ever. This time the monster looked like it came from a Jules Verne novel rather than a portal accidentally created by Reed Richards. The Fantastic Four were busy trying to close the rift, so the Avengers were slotted to contain or destroy the creature that had slipped through into the harbor. The police and SHIELD were evacuating the area, but there were still an unacceptable number of civilians in harm's way.

The beast resembled a giant squid, but seemed just as comfortable on land as in the ocean. It was at
least fifty feet tall, with sixteen flailing tentacles surrounding a central body. Four huge, bulbous eyes were spaced equidistant around its pointed carapace, leaving no exploitable blind spots. The entire creature was a mix between dark green and a deep violet, and was somehow both slimy and scaled simultaneously. It rippled as it moved, rolling from limb to limb, but needing only two on the ground at any one time. That left fourteen other extremities free to rip up docks and crush boats as it progressed. Somehow it had gotten between a passenger ferry and safety, hurling objects into the water in front of the ship as it tried to return the way it had come, but likewise preventing it from reaching shore where the civilians could be evacuated.

Cap was all business as he took in the situation. Gesturing to a nearby loading platform, he ordered, "Hawkeye, high ground. Call out any weaknesses." Pointing to the ocean beyond the creature, "Iron Man, see if you can draw its attention away from that boat. If you can lead it to deeper water away from the pier, so much the better."

He was relieved when Tony nodded his head and, turning to Clint, asked, "Need a ride?"

"Sure," Hawkeye never hesitated. Iron Man grabbed his waist and they were off.

"Thor, light it up, but only once it's far enough away from the shore that there won't be collateral damage. Bruce?"

"Got it." It was frankly a little unnerving to see the speed at which the Hulk came out to play, as well as his ferocity as he leapt onto the monster. Cap suspected the scientist had been repressing his alter ego a little more harshly than usual lately, and was just glad to see the aggression taken out on an enemy rather than SHIELD, or even worse, Clint.

"Natasha, you and I need to get back on that Quinjet."

Apparently the creature was attracted to shiny things, and readily left the ship full of people to pursue the flashy flying metal insect. However, it was also short-sighted and easily distracted, so as soon as it lost sight of Iron Man, it would turn back toward the screaming civilians on the ferry. Stark had to maneuver closer and closer just to keep its attention.

Hulk's attacks were apparently distracting enough to be annoying. The creature finally reached one suckered arm up and, wrapping around the rage monster, plucked him off and hurled him over a mile out to sea, where he landed with a distant splash.
As Hulk swam back towards shore to resume his assault, Iron Man continued his one-man distraction campaign. As he weaved in and out amidst the clutching appendages he mused, "Hey, anyone up for Sushi after this? My treat. Hey!" He swerved abruptly as a suckered limb nearly clipped his leg. He suspected that his armor might not fare as well if thrown the same distance as the Hulk.

"Careful, or you'll be the appetizer," responded Hawkeye, letting fly another explosive charge at the creature as Iron Man drew it away from the ferry. They were almost out of range, but he could still spray water and make distracting noises with his explosive rounds. "But otherwise, I'm in." His breath caught as the monster again came within inches of striking the armor into the ocean, and he shot off another primed projectile. Out of the corner of his eye he noted the passenger ship finally docking and the officials hustling the passengers to safety.

"Civilians are clear," he announced as Iron Man continued to play tag with the behemoth. Another near miss; Stark was really off his game today. "Iron Man, you copy?" Tony really needed to get a little distance from the thing, or at this rate he was going to get hurt.

Before Stark could reply, a roar of engines came from the far side of the monster. Hawkeye had never been so relieved to see the Quinjet. Cap and Widow had taken the vehicle out to sea before turning to attack, to draw the creature further from populated areas and, as a side effect, Iron Man. Clint didn't know if Cap had seen Stark's near-misses, but he suspected that he had. The man was frighteningly observant.

The jet hovered as it got off three shots in quick succession, distracting the beast from its pursuit of Iron Avenger, then turned and shot out towards deeper water. The monster lunged after it with single-minded focus.

Tony blinked in surprise at the unexpected help. "J, why didn't you tell me the Quinjet was inbound?"

"I did, Sir. Your attention was on the creature."

That was odd. Sure, he hadn't been sleeping much, but he didn't think he was that tired. Of course, he had been working around-the-clock for SI, keeping himself too busy to bother with Avenger team exercises. Pepper had been delighted, and had buried him in a mountain of long-neglected paperwork. Whenever he broke for a breather, he immersed himself in his workshop, constantly improving both SI and Avenger tech. After all, isn't that part of his job description?
"Yes, Sir, it is."

He blinked in surprise. "Did I say that out loud, JARVIS?" Maybe he was a little more tired than he thought….

"Yes, Sir. Not unexpected, given that you haven't slept in 59 hours."

He fired the repulsors and set off in pursuit of the monster. "Fine, J, I get it. I'll take a nap when we get home. Happy?"

"Ecstatic, Sir." JARVIS' reply was arid enough to dry jerky.

The brute in front of him roared at the retreating Quinjet and, with a burst of unexpected speed, lunged for the craft, managing to wrap one suckered tentacle fully around it. The vehicle came to an abrupt halt, engines whining as it tried and failed to pull away from the unyielding grip of the creature that then began to shake the plane like a child would a rattle. Tony could only pray that they had their safety harnesses securely fastened.

"Oh, hell no. They aren't getting eaten on my watch!" the genius muttered to himself, diverting more power into his thrusters.

Aloud, he called, "Yo, Ugly! Eyes up front!" as he attacked. He punctuated his catcall with a repulsor blast at the limb holding the Quinjet, carefully aiming short of the vehicle itself. "Didn't anyone ever teach you that it's rude to switch partners in the middle of a dance?" He blasted the tentacle again, throwing in a barrage of missiles for good measure just as Thor arrived and joined the fray with Mjolnir.

With a furious scream the monster hurled the Quinjet away as it had the Hulk earlier, then whirled with shocking speed to deal with the new annoyance. It struck the armored Avenger from the sky with a bone-crushing impact. Iron Man hit the water hard and fast, only managing an inarticulate whuff over the comms. His vision grayed momentarily as his skull struck the back of his helmet when he hit the surface of the water.

"Gotta put more padding in this thing," he muttered as he came to, shaking his head to clear it as he drifted briefly beneath the waves. Before he could recover, the brute snagged his leg and yanked him to the surface, quickly coiling the suckered tentacle around his chest and torso, pinning his arms helplessly to his sides and squeezing. The sudden shift in position caused spots to swirl before his
eyes once again; no doubt about it - he definitely had a concussion.

Alarms began blaring in his HUD as the creature began to crush the armor. "JARVIS…?" he asked vaguely as he tried to reboot his groggy brain.

"Sir! Structural integrity of the armor is compromised at 112% tolerance!"

"Well, we can't have that." He tried unsuccessfully to free his arms, then opted to fire both the palm and foot repulsors at full throttle in an attempt to blast free of the encircling limb. Rather than break loose, the movement resulted in the beast tightening its grip and then shaking the armor like it had the Quinjet earlier. It was all Tony could do at that point to blink back the encroaching black spots that threatened to overwhelm his vision a third time. His head was pounding with a vengeance, hammering staccato with his heartbeat, and his eyes narrowed in agony.

"OK, trying to blast free - bad. Got it." Keying the open Avenger comm, he raised his voice, "Uh, guys? A little help here?"

The Quinjet had already returned and was blasting the tentacle that was holding him. Cap winced sympathetically when the armor was shaken; it had been…unpleasant when the jet had been in that position. He squinted as he noted an apparent dent left in the limb by Mjolnir, then pointed it out to Widow. "Hit it there - looks like a weak spot."

Natasha nodded, never taking her eyes off the enraged creature and their trapped teammate. She let fly a literal sheet of bullets just as the hidden panels in the Iron Man armor opened, disgorging several dozen missiles. Mjolnir struck the tentacle again, causing the creature to shriek in pain.

"Iron Man, now! Try blasting free!" Cap cried as the monster's grip seemed to slacken slightly.

"OK, here goes nothing…" the engineer replied, once again firing all his thrusters simultaneously and this time nearly breaking loose. Unfortunately he beast was determined to keep its prize, and snaked a second tentacle to spiral up his thigh. The first limb constricted spasmodically, and the billionaire could actually hear the gold-titanium alloy crush beneath the pressure.

"JARVIS, ideas?" he gasped, as the metal actually began to compress his chest.

"You could try electrifying the exterior," suggested the AI.
"Do it," Stark grunted. The armor was pressing inwards with enough force that breathing was becoming a serious problem.

Wordlessly the computer complied, sending a jolt strong enough to kill a herd of elephants racing across the surface of the Iron Man. Unfortunately, rather than release him, the tentacles both spasmed in response. The genius screamed in agony as the limb surrounding his thigh contracted, snapping his femur along with the armor. The suit's midsection gave way partially as well, driving a jagged wedge of metal into his abdomen. The pain rolled over him like a tidal wave, whiting out his vision before he slumped into unconsciousness.

Barton swallowed down bile as he caught sight of the other man's leg, now dangling at an unnatural angle from the unmoving form. He had commandeered a SHIELD helicopter and had arrived just in time for Stark's tortured scream to make his breath hitch in fear. Without further thought six explosive arrows sank into each restraining limb, detonating with a satisfying blast of light and sound.

"Iron Man, report! Status!" Through the cacophony the archer could hear the horror in Cap's voice.

"I think he passed out from the pain," Clint yelled, trying to make sure he was heard over the rotors. "From this angle his leg looks pretty bad."

Rogers reached a decision as the monster began drawing its now-unresisting prey towards a cruelly-beaked mouth. There was little doubt concerning its intentions. "Thor! Light it up! We don't have the luxury of being careful any more."

"As you say," replied the demi-god grimly, holding his hammer aloft. Storm clouds immediately began to gather, swirling in angry grayness overhead. A bolt shot down to Mjolnir and, once charged, Thor aimed at the creature's carapace, striking the mouth that had been about to consume the fallen superhero. An unearthly screech rent the air just before the monster exploded into a billion pieces of bloody chum.

Unfortunately, Iron Man had been flung into the ocean in the process, and was now obscured by the polluted water as he sank motionless beneath the waves.

TBC.....
Cap hit the hatch release at a run, diving unceremoniously into the water just as Barton did the same from his helicopter. They both began searching as Thor and the Quinjet arrived overhead and coordinated their own search pattern.

It all seemed so surreal to Steve. They couldn't lose Tony now, not with the misunderstanding that lay between them still unresolved. The mantra of "no, no, no" kept echoing in the back of Steve's skull. "He can't be dead. Please don't let him be dead. Please don't let him be dead." The desperation was a palpable vise clenching around his heart, threatening to squeeze out his life as he searched deeper and deeper without success.

He surfaced long enough to take a breath before diving again, staying under until his need for air became unbearable. On his third dive he pushed even deeper, all too aware that the weight of the armor would be dragging his teammate to the ocean floor, beyond all hope of timely rescue. He remembered the broken sections of armor all too vividly, and wondered if there were redundancies in place that would keep the rest of the suit airtight. Otherwise, Tony would have already drowned and his prayers would be in vain.

Finally, finally, near the end of his endurance, Steve caught a flash of hot-rod-red and gold through the murk and poured on the speed.

He latched desperately onto a gauntleted arm and, although he managed to halt the armor's drift towards the sea floor, he had only minimal success in hauling his burden towards the water's surface. The weight of the armor fought him with every stroke, but he didn't have the energy to spare to pry it off his motionless friend. Intellectually he knew that he could let go for the few moments he would need to swim to the surface for air and return, and not even lose much distance to gravity in the process, but his reptilian brain was convinced he would lose Tony forever. He hung on with every ounce of his infamous stubbornness. His need to breathe burned in his lungs, but he doggedly kept his hand cemented around Iron Man's arm as he kicked determinedly for the surface.

Just as he felt he might actually drown, a huge splash stirred the water above them and, before he could blink, Thor had gathered both Avengers with one mighty arm and, with the other, used Mjolnir to blast them to the surface. Air had never tasted sweeter than that first gasp as they broke the ocean's surface.

"How fare you, Captain?" the blonde bellowed as they continued skyward to where Natasha waited with the plane. She had picked up Clint as Thor rescued him; Steve could see the rope still dangling from the hatch as Hawkeye disappeared into the vehicle. He coughed, still gulping air reflexively, and nodded a reassurance.
"I'm fine," he rasped, coughing again when the words irritated his throat. "Quinjet."

"Aye, almost there."

Thor flew through the still-open hatch and landed with surprising care, laying Iron Man supine on the floor of the cabin as Steve fell to his knees beside him. Widow gunned the engine before they settled, calling, "The helicarrier is en route to meet us!" over her shoulder as they flew. Rogers nodded absently as he began to pry the battered armor off their injured friend. He started with the faceplate, finding the catch just behind the angle of the jaw and hitting the release. To his great relief, there was no rush of water; at least the helmet had remained airtight, so they didn't have to worry about drowning resuscitation at least. Tony was terribly pale though, and had shadows beneath his eyes that spoke of too little sleep over too many days. A quick check of his carotid revealed a strong, albeit rapid, pulse, and Steve let out a breath he'd been unaware of holding.

"He's alive at least," he sighed in relief. "Thor, help me with the rest of the armor."


Steve stared miserably at their still-unconscious teammate as he sat in one of the ubiquitous hard plastic hospital chairs. They were not an improvement over the waiting room chairs of 1945. He groaned and shifted uncomfortably.

The Quinjet had been met by a team a medics upon landing, and the Avengers found themselves shoved unceremoniously aside as Stark was stabilized and loaded onto the waiting stretcher. Besides the obviously-broken leg, initial evaluation revealed a large gash in his left flank, broken ribs, and apparent head trauma. He was whisked off for further studies and then surgery while the rest of the team were herded into a small waiting room for a quick debrief with Coulson. A worried Pepper appeared a short time later, a de-Hulked Bruce in tow; SHIELD had sent a helicopter to Stark Tower to pick them up. They joined the tense group to await news; an agent appeared a few minutes later with Styrofoam cups of coffee to pass around.

It turned out that the jagged part of the suit that caused the gash had also entered the inventor's abdomen, necessitating emergency surgery. Ultimately he was found to only have a small splenic laceration that was repaired, so they proceeded with the operative rodding of the shattered femur. Stark was now recovering in a private room, the entire team gathered at his bedside.

Steve took a moment to catalogue the people in the room. Stark, front and center, was still hooked
up to a frightening number of monitors. Apparently doctors could track all types of things these
days, from blood pressure to oxygen saturation, and were doing so with gusto. They all seemed to
be beeping steadily in a frankly reassuring fashion, so he let his eyes wander to the far side of the
hospital bed. Miss Potts sat in another one of the orange plastic chairs next to Tony, responding to
messages on her Starkpad one-handed as she stroked the industrialist's head absently with the other,
running her fingers through matted hair. Beyond her, Bruce returned his gaze with a slight quirk at
the corner of his mouth that might have been a smile on another face, before he took off his glasses
and began cleaning them nervously with his shirt. Barton and Romanov were seated on Steve's side
of the bed, so close together that they could have been sharing a single chair. Both stared blankly
forward, but their hands were laced tightly together. At the foot of the bed, between the patient and
the door, Thor paced back and forth anxiously. He apparently didn't trust hospitals (something to do
with his first visit to 'Midgard') and was doing his best to guard their unconscious friend.

A nurse entered just then and, with an encouraging smile at Miss Potts, went straight to the IV to
hang a smaller bag next to it. Steve must have looked alarmed, for she turned her smile on him and
murmured, "Don't worry, it's just antibiotics."

He sighed and nodded slightly, indicating that he'd heard her, then settled in again to wait for Stark to
come around.


Tony became aware of a quiet conversation going on as he began to drift to consciousness, but it was
hard to make out through the steady beeping that seemed to permeate everything. 'Pepper and Steve'
he realized, placing the voices if not the words. 'Why are Pepper and Steve talking in our bedroom?'
He tried to crack open his eyes and admonish them - hey, he was trying to sleep here - but was
assaulted by such bright white light that he whimpered and closed them again tightly. 'Not home -
hospital' he groaned mentally.

"Tony? Can you hear me?" Pepper asked in her 'worried' voice.

What did he do this time? Why couldn't he remember?

"Mmmmm-hmmmm," he managed to hum in reply. His mouth was dry and felt like his tongue was
three times larger than it should be, all caked and clumsy. Concentrating, he turned his head a bare
inch in the direction of her voice as he asked, "Pep?"

The movement, small as it was, had been a mistake. Suddenly his brain felt like it was exploding, as
if someone had found one of his Jericho missiles and had detonated it in his skull. The white-hot
pain lanced through him, pulling out another involuntary moan. "Owwwwwww… m' head."

"You have a pretty bad concussion," his CEO whispered softly, running her fingers through his hair. Oh, that felt niiiiceee. "Don't move, OK? I think the doctors will be in in a minute to check you out."

He finally managed to pry open one eye a tiny bit, enough to focus on vibrant red hair. "W' hap'n?" he slurred out.

"The big brother of the squid that attacked the Nautilus," replied Banner with a small snort. "Thor made it explode."

"Good…” Memory began to trickle back, little scenes here and there. "Quinjet shook up… e'rybody 'k?"

"Yeah, Tony, everybody's fine but you." Steve seemed… a little upset by this, but Tony didn't have the spare brain cells to worry about it right now.

"Oh. Good…” he mumbled, before slipping back into the warm darkness.

His recovery was slow, but Pepper arranged for his transfer back to Stark Tower as soon as he was medically stable. She knew that otherwise he'd sign himself out AMA, and she preferred to keep the doctors in the loop. Also, long experience had taught her that he would do better at home, even if he pushed himself more than he should, and what was the point of being a billionaire if you couldn't hire private nurses and physical therapists? Also, Happy insisted on helping with the physical therapy once the genius was able to stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time, and Tony tended to respond more favorably to his irritating prodding than the bland instructions of the hired professionals.

The billionaire slept an inordinate amount, and, while he didn't complain of a headache, she caught him wincing frequently when he didn't think she was looking. He fired the hired help as soon as he could get away with it, stating security concerns, but Pepper understood that strangers made him uncomfortable. If he had his preferences, he'd limit his personal encounters to Pepper, Happy and Rhodey whenever he was sick. She obliged during his first week postop, staying home and managing her duties with her laptop and video conference calls. Still, she was CEO of a Fortune
500 company and, as much as she would like to stay home all day with him until he was completely recovered, she had to get back to work.

"Tony, I have to go," she murmured one morning, brushing his hair back from his face and kissing his forehead softly. "There's an important Board meeting at nine, and I can't miss it."

He blinked at her blearily. "It's OK, Pep. Don't worry, I can take care of myself."

"I know." She stared searchingly into his eyes. "Just… I asked Captain Rogers if he would check on you once in a while."

He couldn't hide his wince at that. The Avengers had visited frequently, especially Captain Rogers, but Pepper noticed the polite distance that Tony kept from them, putting on his best 'paparazzi' mask until they had gone; at least, with everyone but Bruce. Dr. Banner seemed to be on good terms with her mercurial Chief of R+D. She would have asked the physicist to look after Tony, but when they were together the two would start talking about one project or another until the engineer was completely exhausted. She preferred that he concentrate his energy on getting well; the science would still be there afterwards.

Tony didn't trust Natasha after her charade at SI, and apparently Barton by extension, so they were out. In fact, the genius seemed even more uncomfortable around the archer than the Widow at present, for reasons he wouldn't explain, but clearly there was no way he'd be able to rest with either of them watching him. Thor was off visiting Jane while they had some downtime, so was unavailable for billionaire baby-sitting duty.

That left Rogers. Pepper hadn't noticed a problem with the soldier before, but there seemed to be one now, given the level of objecting going on.

"Really, Pep, I'm fine. I don't need anyone to check on me," the engineer wheedled. He turned his eyes towards the ceiling, "You can watch me, right J?"

"Certainly, Sir, but Miss Potts has a point. It would be nice for a human being to check on you intermittently to assure that your needs are met."

Stark scowled. "Traitor," he muttered, wrestling himself into a sitting position with his elbows and bunching up his pillows behind him. "Fine, whatever," he muttered, picking up a Starkpad from the bedside table and pulling up one of his latest projects.
Pepper let it go, smiling fondly and leaning in to kiss him. "I'll see you later, OK?"

He looked up at that. "Later," he agreed, eyes fixed on hers, dark and intense. There were unspoken volumes there, but she didn't have time to figure out what he wasn't saying. SI had waited for her long enough, and she had a job to do. She picked up her purse and closed the door gently behind herself. He'd be fine with Rogers.

Tony waited until she was gone before throwing his covers off and snagging the crutches leaning against his nightstand. "JARVIS? Lock down all access to my suite. No one gets in without my say-so."

"Sir, Miss Potts instructed…"

"Nope, none of that. I'm countermanding those instructions. Nobody without my OK, not until Pepper gets back." He hobbled his way to the bathroom, taking care not to put weight on his rodded leg. Contrary to popular belief, he did know how to follow doctors' instructions, he just often chose not to. In this case, the consequences of not allowing his leg to heal could be a permanent limp, or maybe even more surgery, and he wanted to avoid that at all costs. So, crutches with minimal weight bearing.

He had showered, shaved, and had just begun to brush his teeth when JARVIS interrupted him. "Sir, Captain Rogers is requesting entry."

He stilled, staring at the mirror where haunted, dark eyes met his own. Coming to a decision, he spat, quickly rinsed his mouth, then grabbed his crutches. "Sure, OK," he sighed. "Let the man in. I'll meet him in the den."

It took a few minutes to navigate the hallway and, by the time he made it to the sitting room, Rogers was already there. He stood, hands shoved in trouser pockets, in front of the huge wall of windows with their spectacular view of the New York skyline, staring into the distance. Tony cleared his throat and the man whirled, obviously startled.

"Hey, Capsicle, how's it hanging?" he asked with false jocularity as he maneuvered his way to the sofa.

"Um, fine. Miss Potts asked that I…" He shifted from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable.
"Yeah, yeah, she told me." He waved a hand dismissively as he sank onto the couch, setting his crutches to the side and snagging an ever-present Starkpad from the adjacent side table. "As you can see, I'm doing perfectly fine on my own. I'm certain that the leader of the Avengers has more important things to do than baby-sit a consultant." He pointedly booted up the tablet before muttering with fake distraction, "Now, if you don't mind, I have work to attend to..." He glanced up, raised an eyebrow pointedly and jerked his head towards the door.

Instead of accepting the rather blatant dismissal, Steve ensconced himself in the chair opposite Tony, leaning forward, elbows on knees and clasping his hands together in front of himself. He gazed at his hands uncomfortably for a minute, then, coming to a decision, raised his eyes to meet Stark's appraising stare.

"Look, you were pretty badly hurt," he began. "Someone should be here to look after..."

"Oh, like you guys did so well last time!" Tony interrupted, suddenly furious. "Your 'looking after me' nearly got me killed!" No longer faking politeness, he glared at the unwelcome intruder in his living room. "I don't 'need' you, Rogers, and I sure as hell don't want you, so why don't you just leave?"

"Tony...." There was anguish in his voice that even the enraged billionaire couldn't miss. "Look, I'm sorry. I am so sorry. We screwed up, but we'll do better. I swear we will."

"Yeah, well, save it for your team," he muttered, glancing down to his Starkpad and pretending to work on the document on his screen. "This 'consultant' has a real job to do, and I'd best get back to doing it before Fury decides to kick me out all together." He continued to jab at the touch screen, scrolling through his e-mail and discarding half-a-dozen messages without looking at them.

"But you are part of my team!" insisted the super soldier, throwing out his hands in frustration as he jumped up and began to pace.

"Not according to Fury..." Tony mumbled under his breath. By Steve's sharp intake of breath and sudden halt, he knew the super soldier heard his anyway. He was aware of Steve's 'puppy-eyes' staring at him, but he still refused to meet the forthright gaze.

Eventually the other man nodded, new determination in his tone that made no sense to the inventor. "All right, I'll go. Have JARVIS call if you need anything?"
"Sure, sure", he muttered, still not meeting Steve's eyes. He waved a hand dismissively and, with a small sigh, Rogers headed for the elevator.

The inventor played at being busy for another few moments until he was certain that the other man was well and truly gone. Then, sighing himself, he set aside his tablet and leaned his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. The masquerade had taken all his energy; he was frankly exhausted and his head was pounding. He'd just rest his eyes for a minute, then get to work for real.

He was asleep between one breath and the next.

He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but he was startled awake by JARVIS. "Sir! You need to be aware of a situation."

Jerking his head forward, he scrubbed the grit out of his eyes with one hand, then pinched the bridge of his nose. The post-concussive headache had lowered to a dull throbbing, enough to be annoying but not incapacitating. He rolled his shoulders and squinted towards the ceiling. "OK, I'm awake. What's going on, J?"

An image projected on the large-screen television that sat against the wall. "...News 4 covering the battle in Midtown. As you can see from the devastation behind me..." Tony mentally tuned out the announcer's drivel in order to focus on the action. Several buildings appeared to be smoldering ruins, with flames still roaring through others. Everywhere swarmed metal-faced robots, moving so jerkily as to resemble a bad Syfy channel made-for-tv movie.

"What's happening, JARVIS?" he snapped. The scene was clearly being filmed through a high-powered telephoto lens, and so left something to be desired for detail.

"The Avengers were called out to deal with..." Here the AI paused, as if the next phrase were physically painful, "...Doombots. Sir."

Tony wrinkled up his nose. "Doombots? What kind of idiot name is that? Nevermind, I don't want to know. Are the Avengers kicking their poorly-programmed metal asses?" He inched forward to
the edge of the couch in order to get a better look at the carnage.

"No, Sir. They are not. Apparently, with Doctor Banner's alter ego in the fore, SHIELD has no one technically capable of assessing the robots' programming. They are currently destroying them one at a time. This would not be problematic except that they are being produced faster than they are being destroyed. Hence, despite your being on medical leave, I felt it best to notify you of the situation."

Tony thought furiously. "JARVIS, will my leg fracture handle the suit so I can get to the scene?"

There was a pause. "No, Sir. The repulsors imbedded in that boot would inevitably refracture the rodded femur, likely resulting in six weeks mandatory bedrest with traction or reoperation."

That sounded like the opposite of fun. "Scratch that, then." Still, he needed to get his hands on one of those bots if he wanted to help at all. Well, if Muhammad couldn't go to the mountain without re-hospitalization, the mountain was going to have to come to Muhammad.

"Can you get me a secure private channel to Captain Rogers?"

"Certainly, Sir." There was a moment of static - static - and then the line cleared.

"Cap, can you hear me?" The inventor spoke into thin air, certain that JARVIS would pick up his voice and transmit it.

"Iron Man! Are you…?"

"Don't get your panties in a twist, I'm still at the Tower." He mentally rolled his eyes; of course Steve thought he was on his way against medical advice. Because Tony was an idiot, right? He shook his head and rushed on. "JARVIS apprised me of the situation, and I think I can help from here. Have a SHIELD Agent bring one of those smashed bots to my workshop and I'll meet him there."

"Tony, you…" Guilt fairly dripped from the words, and Stark felt his face flush with anger as he cut Rogers off again.

"Remember when you asked me what I was without the suit? Now is when you get to find out! Is
Tony Stark a member of this team, or is it only Iron Man?” He spat out the last with more venom than absolutely necessary; 'Tony Stark, not recommended' still burned like a white-hot poker.

Steve closed his eyes for a moment as the rest of the Avengers remained pointedly silent, then came to a decision. He nodded once in agreement and replied, "Of course. I'll have one sent right over."

By the time Tony hobbled down to his workshop, JARVIS was announcing the incoming SHIELD helicopter. "Direct them down here ASAP, J," He clapped his hands together and muttered, "Let's do some science…"

It took him less than fifteen minutes after receiving the robot remains to determine that the machines were networked, five more to program an override code into one of Clint's electronic arrowheads and hand it to the waiting Agent.

"Take this to Barton, then come right back. I'll make more in the meantime." With any luck, taking out one bot with the shut down code would cause a logic cascade through several others in the immediate network before their programming could compensate. He just needed to know how many could be taken out with a single shot so he could produce enough arrowheads.

As the man ran back to the helipad, the genius keyed the comm he'd retrieved on the way to the workshop.

"Hawkeye, there's a SHIELD guy headed your way with an arrow. Put it three inches directly to the left of the blue panel on the front of any robot, and it should take at least some of them down. I need to know how many it takes out all together so I know how many more to make."

"Right." Hawkeye was succinct, but the scientist knew he'd do it.

"Cap, these things share programming, but they're unlikely to be all hooked together. Probably have nodes. Assuming the tech I'm sending Barton works, he'll let me know how many he needs. I'm fabricating more as we speak, but I need someone to come pick them up."

"All right. I'll send another agent immediately." Cap was all business now that there was a plan.
Tony barely registered the reply as he set to work with a vengeance. He was almost done programming a third arrowhead when a whoop over the comm disrupted his train of thought.

"Good job, Hawkeye, Iron Man," Cap's voice rang out. Tony realized that the earlier shout of triumph had come from Barton.

Keying his speaker, he demanded tersely, "How many hit the dirt? I have three more ready…" His hands flew even faster over his keyboard.

"All of them!" Clint crowed. "You are the Man, Stark!"

The engineer blinked, hands stilling. "All of them? Seriously?!? What kind of idiot programmed these things?"

"Apparently someone calling himself 'Doctor Doom',' answered Cap, enunciating the name carefully as if he didn't quite believe it himself.

"Old pal of Richards apparently," chimed in Barton.

Tony closed his eyes and collapsed onto a stool, suddenly aware of being exhausted all the way down to his bones. "Of course he is," he sighed with resignation.


A few weeks later, Tony graduated from crutches to a cane, and his ribs hardly hurt at all any more. He still wasn't cleared for missions or even training exercises, but the Doombot attack had reassured him that Cap truly meant it when he said that Tony Stark was an Avenger. The rest of the team seemed to agree, regardless of his SHIELD designation as consultant. Tentatively he rejoined the team dinners, gratified at the way faces lit up as he hobbled into the room. Clint pulled out a chair for him at the head of the table and didn't even make a smart-ass comment, just said, "It's good to see you, Tony."

Bolstered, he showed up that Thursday for movie night, and got to pick the film. He chose to repeat the original classic 'Star Wars', vetoing Clint's suggested 'Back to the Future' with surprising venom,
disparaging the lack of scientific accuracy. After that the team gradually fell back into patterns established long before Tony had ever been shrunk to half the size of a ruler and, if Stark was still uncomfortable with being in the kitchen longer than the time it took to pour a cup of coffee? He tried very, very hard not to let it show.

As he stress-tested the material Reed had sent him for possible Hulk trousers (Richards owed him big time for both the portal-squid and the doombots, and providing some of his patented super-stretchy uniform fabric for testing for possible Hulk pants was the least he could do), he finally firmly pushed the last of his doubts aside, determined not to let them affect his life any more than they already had.

Of course, that was when Nick Fury appeared in his workshop unannounced and cleared his throat.

The inventor startled, dropping the stylus he'd been recording data with onto the floor with a clatter as he swiveled his chair around to face the intruder.

"JARVIS, do we need to have another discussion about who is allowed to enter my workshop uninvited?"

"No, Sir, but Director Fury utilized override codes that I could not countermand."

"Did he now?" Stark fixed the interloper with a glare. "Can I help you with something, Fury?" he gritted out.

The Director was as imperturbable as ever, raising an eyebrow and giving a small nod. "Actually, I might be able to help you with something, Stark."

"Oh?" The billionaire refused to give him anything more than the one word.

The older man pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled deeply. "It has been brought to my attention that you are still listed as a SHIELD 'consultant' rather than an Avenger."

"I'm aware," the genius growled. "What of it?"

"I'm here to rectify that oversight," he replied, sighing setting a thick, manila folder on the desk in
front of Tony. "Your new contract as an Avenger."

Stark could feel his jaw drop open as he mechanically picked up the paperwork. Still keeping one eye on Fury, he flipped through the folder, skimming over the more salient points as he mentally weighed the pros and cons.

It wasn’t as if he needed or even wanted a salary from SHIELD; they didn’t pay anyone on the team but Barton and Romanov anyway. He didn’t really care what the Director thought, and even less what the WSC believed. Remaining a 'consultant' meant that he could at any time tell the entire organization to take a long hike off a short pier with minimal legal ramifications. If he were 'officially' an Avenger, he would actually have to answer to those yahoos.

He grinned. He hadn't really thought about it before, but as a 'consultant' he could tell SHIELD where to shove their after-action reports.

After all, the only people who mattered, the other Avengers, already considered him a full member of the team. They listened to him; they respected him. OK, Barton could be an idiot, but that was nothing new. Tony now fully believed that the archer would have done the same thing to any of the other team members.

Probably.

Maybe.

He shook his head and sighed. Fine, he still had a few issues with the whole 'tupperware' incident. Just add them to the list of psychological landmines that he regularly avoided thinking about. 'De Nile' was not just a river in Egypt.

Still, he might feel better if Barton had a few embarrassing accidents….

'Prank war later; Fury now,' he decided. Fixing the Director with a determined stare, he handed the folder back. "No thank you. I think I'll stay a Consultant for the time being. Leaves my options open."

Fury looked unsurprised as he accepted the unsigned paperwork. "I knew you were smart, Stark."
Tony narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "So why did you offer me the position if you knew I'd refuse it?"

Fury snorted, looking down at the folder in his hand. "Because your entire team threatened to quit *en masse* if I didn't."

'So that's why Rogers suddenly sounded so determined the day he left my Penthouse; he was planning to give Fury an ultimatum!' Tony suddenly couldn't speak around the lump in his throat. Any remaining doubt about his place with the Avengers vanished. Swallowing, he clarified hoarsely, "Even Barton?"

Fury smiled, and wasn't that a disturbing image? "Even Barton," he confirmed.

The engineer glanced at the tensile strength monitor to avoid the other man's gaze. "Huh," was his only comment.

After a pause during which it became evident that the genius wasn't going to add anything, Fury cleared his throat and raised an eyebrow. "Well, Stark, should you change your mind and decide to put yourself under the WSC's thumb, far be it from me to refuse you. Meanwhile," he held up the folder, then dropped it on a nearby tabletop, "feel free to have your legal department review this and make any changes they deem appropriate." He gave a quick nod of dismissal and whirled, striding towards the exit.

"Don't hold your breath!" the billionaire called after him. He waited until the man had disappeared before turning his back to the door once again. Now that he'd finally been actually offered the position, he realized that it wasn't really all that important. He smiled. It was nice to be asked, though.

"No reason to sweat the small stuff," he murmured under his breath. "And my 'official' designation is small stuff. To the people that matter, I *am* an Avenger."

Smiling, he reached over to turn up the gain on tensometer, and wondered idly if the fabric could be dyed purple.
The End

End Notes

PROMPT:

http://avengerkink.livejournal.com/17613.html?page=3#comments

"Tony is hit by some shrinking ray and is then 6 in tall. He's incredibly pissed by it, especially as the team see it as an easy way of shutting him up when he gets annoying.

For example: Picking him up and putting him on a high shelf when he gets in the way or things like that, and at one point, putting him inside a plastic box to muffle his swearing and forgetting about him for a while until they realize he's no longer thumping on the edges and has curled up in the corner of the box.

He could also be a little light headed as they hadn't punctured any holes in the box.

I just want Tony then upset with all of them after that and not talking and they try to help with stuff to make it up to him but he doesn't respond.

Anything after that is up to you :) Angst is beautiful XD"

Works inspired by this one: [Don't Sweat the Small Stuff - Art](#) by [LePeru (Nizah)](#)

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